



The Status and Representation of the Third Gender in Ancient Indian Texts

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Abstract

The presence of a third gender, like man or woman, has never been accepted by society as a natural thing. One thing I can say is that neither ancient nor present society is free from gender discrimination. The seeds of the existence of the third gender community were planted at the beginning of civilization. The presence of the third gender has been directly observed in ancient Indian texts like Mānava-Dharmaśāstra, Arthaśāstra, Kāmasūtra, and Mahābhārata. Only a researcher can uncover the reason for their gender discrimination, which is the difference in sex chromosomes, and present the real truth to society. After thousands of years of humiliation, discrimination, and dependency, today their constitutional rights have been established. Like 'Male' and 'Female' in society, today they are known as 'Third Gender' or 'Transgender'.

Keywords- Third genders, Transgender, LGBTQ

Today's discussion on the third gender is very relevant in India. Usually in society, there is another gender in addition to men and women, which we call the third gender. The term 'transgender' refers to a person who is biologically neither male nor female. They are a specific community that has a mix of both men and women. However, this

gender diversity is not socially clear. There are many entities in the third-gender community. Now again, the term 'transgender' is being used as an identity term. In a word, those who are born physically and mentally different from ordinary men and women are called the Third Gender. The importance of the third gender has increased in modern society. In India, this third-gender community is known by various names, including Hijra, Kinnar, Thirunambi, Jogappa, Mangalamukhi, Shivashakti, and Ardhalangi. First of all, gender and sex are two different things. A person reflects their gender in society through their behavior, dress, hairstyle, tone of voice, gesture, posture, and other aspects.

The term 'sex' refers to the biological differences between a man and a woman. But if a biological man considers himself a woman and his femininity becomes evident in his behaviour, dress, speech, and everything else, and on the other hand, when a biological woman considers herself a man and behaves as a man, society calls her a third gender. The third gender community includes intersex, crossdressers, transsexual, gender fluid, and Hijra communities.

Currently, the discussion on LGBTQ+ is quite relevant in India and the whole world. Around 1990, the term 'LGB' was used instead of 'lesbian', 'gay', and 'bisexual'. Later, transgender people joined this movement, and the term was transformed into 'LGBT'. Later, the term 'queer' was added in 2010 and became 'LGBTQ'. 'LGBT+' and 'LGBTQ+' use this '+' sign to identify some additional communities of people who are not included in LGBTQ. For example - 'LGBTQIA+'. (An Abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual) '2SLGBTQ+', 'LGBTQQ', 'GLBT', 'GLBTQ'. Each of the terms indicates the third gender community.

The existence of a third gender, like man and woman, has been natural since ancient times. The existence of a third gender has been evident in ancient Indian society since the Vedic period. The power of creation of the world by puruṣaḥ is described in the ṛgveda. The power that we witness only in the female body. The creation of the world solely from men, without women, indicates a third entity. The Ṛgveda states that Brāhmaṇa were created from the mouth of the Puruṣaḥ, Kṣatriya from his arms, Vaiśya from his thighs, and Śūdra from his feet. Again, another mantra of the Ṛgveda is called Hiranyagarbha, the creator of the world. The one who created the sky and the vast waters. Here too, the birth of the world by that man is mentioned-

"मा नो हिंसीज्जनिता यः पृथिव्या

यो वा दिवं सत्यधर्मा जजान ।

यश्चापश्चन्द्रा वृहतीजजान

कस्मै देवाय हविषा विधेम ॥ " *1

The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa is the first to use the word 'napuṃsaka' in reference to the third gender. Women and transgender people danced together in the Vedic era. During that era, people of the third gender were identified as dancers.

From the book 'Ancient India' by the famous historian Romila Thapar, it is known that there was no such discrimination between men and women in the Vedic era. Both men and women had long hair. In the Vedic era, men were equally entitled to wear jewellery like women. If a man of Shudra descent in the Vedic era had intercourse with a Brahmin girl, he was made a eunuch by cutting off his penis as a punishment. The biggest proof of the existence of a third gender is that castration, that is, castration by cutting his penis, was common in society at that time. In the book 'The Wonder that was India', Dr A.L. Basham says that eunuchs were not completely non-existent in society, although their number was small. *2 There is a mention of eunuchs in the Vedic era, and most of those eunuchs belonged to the Shudra community. In ancient India, this eunuchisation was one of the parts of punishment.

The Manusmṛti, the most important religious code of India, discusses the origin of the world, the rules of ordination, initiation, marriage, livelihood, the caste system, penance, etc. The book describes religious rules, rules of duty, the structure of society, the governance of the kingdom by the monarchy, and the rules of conduct of the king. Along with various other topics, the society and life of that time are described. The social status of people of different communities can be determined from the picture of the social infrastructure that has been captured during that era. Manu also describes the social status and social rights of people of the third gender community in the Manusmṛti 'dharmaśāstra' along with all communities, both male and female.

Manu described the biological process of the birth of a third gender in his dharmaśāstra. If the man has an excess of semen, a son is born; if the woman has an

excess of semen, a daughter is born; and if both have equal semen, an impotent (अपुमान्) child is born.

पुमान् पुंसोऽधिके शुके स्त्री भवत्यधिके स्त्रियाः।

समेऽपुमान् पुंस्त्रीयौ वा क्षीणेऽल्पे च विपर्ययः ॥ *3

According to medical science, the sex chromosomes of an intersex person are either XXY or XYY. Manu, in his dharmaśāstra, explained the difference in these sex chromosomes in his own way by the excess and deficiency of sperm in men or women. From this, it can be inferred that ancient religious writers introduced modernity to medical science.

Again, in the first chapter of Manusmṛitī, the creation of the world by man is described. The creator Brahmā created the heavens, the earth, the sky, the eight directions and the waters. The dharmaśāstra itself describes the reproductive power of man alone.

ताभ्यां स शकलाभ्यां च दिवं भूमिञ्च निर्ममे ।

मध्ये व्योम दिशश्चष्टा - वपां स्थानञ्च शाश्वतम् ॥ *4

Again, Manu has described the issue of same-sex sexual intercourse (lesbian sex), which is quite relevant in modern society. Nowadays, same-sex love and marriage are seen in society. Modern society and law have agreed to this issue-

कन्यैव कन्यां या कुर्यात् तस्याः स्याद् द्विशतो दमः ।

शुल्कञ्च द्विगुणं दद्याच्छिफाश्चैवाप्नुयाद्द्वरा ॥ *5

The punishment for a girl who destroys her virginity by inserting her finger into the vagina of another girl is described here. Similarly, Vātsyāyana's 'kāmasūtram' mentions oral sexual intercourse between a man and another man (gay sex) or third genders –

प्रमृष्टकुण्डलाश्चापि युवानः परिचारकाः।

केषाञ्चिदेव कुर्वन्ति नराणामौपरिष्टकम् ॥*6

From this discussion, it can be inferred that homosexuality existed in ancient Indian society. Although the religious scholar Manu mentioned punishment for

homosexuality. But Vātsyāyana, in his 'kāmasūtram', supports this homosexuality for livelihood.

Vātsyāyana, who wrote during the Gupta era, not only describes the sexual desires of men and women in his 'kāmasūtram', but also specifies the means of satisfying the sexual desires of men with people of the third gender and men with men in the 'Aupariṣṭaka' mukhamehana chapter. Not only that, people of the third gender or eunuchs will only please men, that is, lick their penis and satisfy their sexual desires. This sexual act is performed by eunuchs who do not have a livelihood to earn a living. He also clearly states the types of eunuchs, female and male. Both of them can satisfy their sexual desires by performing sexual acts on their mouths. The Acharyas have called this matter 'Aupariṣṭaka' or 'Mukhamehana'. Lustful men will satisfy their desires with female eunuchs in exchange for money for the satisfaction of their sexual desires. The author of the Kama Sutra speaks of eunuchs engaging in prostitution to earn a living.

In the first section of his 'Arthashastra', called 'Vinayādhikaraṇa'. Kautilya says that if a woman's husband fails to produce children or becomes a eunuch, his wife can abandon him. In the third section called 'Dharmasthiyam', he deprives the eunuch, or the third gender, of the right to inherit ancestral property. Therefore, in this case, it can be said that in that era, people of the third gender were deprived of their own rights. Again, if a woman's husband is a eunuch, Kautilya also gave that woman the right to remarry. If someone insults a eunuch or eunuch without reason, Kautilya also mentions the punishment of a dowry or fine in the Arthaśāstra. Again, most of the people who guarded the beautiful concubines in the harem of the Mauryan kings were eunuchs or khojā.

Eunuchs were employed as slaves in the Mughal harem on the orders of the Sultan. A place where entry is prohibited is called a harem. Especially a place where women live. The harem was mainly occupied by the concubines of kings, and other female members spent their entire lives there. The harem of the Mughal era was guarded by these eunuchs, who were basically slaves. The eunuchs guarded the main door of the harem and monitored all the activities of the harem. Thousands of eunuchs were used in the harem for various purposes. The practice of making eunuchs is

prohibited in Islam. During the Mughal period, eunuchs were used as slaves and were humiliated.

The Ardhanārīśvara Tattva deity mentioned in the Kalika Purana refers to the third gender. The Mohinī form of Nārāyaṇa mentioned in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa is one of the reflections of the transformative entity. The character of Śikhaṇḍī in the Mahābhārata is considered to be a eunuch, but this is not true. He is a woman in the first stage and a man in the second stage. This character from the Mahābhārata can be called one of the examples of a transformed being or hormonal transformation.

The existence of a third gender, like men and women, was very natural from the beginning of creation. It is known from the Vedas, Upanishads, Dharmashastra, Arthashastra, Kamashastra, Puranas, history, etc., that ancient society also accepted the existence of this third entity. But due to being exceptional from ordinary men and women, they were subjected to social discrimination. They were even deprived of the identity of citizens of the country. But times have changed; on April 15, 2014, the Supreme Court recognised this third gender as 'transgender'. The National Legal Society Authority (NALSA) has recognised the third gender as 'transgender'. Articles 14, 15 and 21 of the Indian Constitution also include the third community among all citizens. Although the 'Transgender Rights Bill' was passed based on the NALSA judgement of 2014, the 'Transgender Rights Bill' was later amended in the Lok Sabha in 2016. The 'Protection of Rights Bill' Act was passed in 2019. Currently, additional reservations have been made for the third-gender community in admissions to various schools and colleges and in job examinations in government institutions. In ancient society, the third gender used to earn a living as guards for the beautiful concubines of kings or by entertaining men. But today they are living like ordinary people with their heads held high in society. Today, we witness some examples where society has given respect to people of the third gender as guides. They are far above the common people in knowledge, dignity, dance, art, and music. Even after so many victories, even today, we have to fight to establish the status of the third-gender people in society. But they were not at all marginalised in ancient Indian society. Ancient Indian texts have discussed their social status, livelihood, and sexual instincts in detail. This proves that the existence of third-gender people like ordinary men and women was an eternal truth from the early days of Indian civilisation.

Endnotes

1. Ṛgveda 10/121/8
2. An other unpleasent feature of ancient civilizations, the eunuch, was also are though not completely unknown"- The Wonder That Was India Dr.L.Basham
3. Manusmṛti 3/49
4. Manusamhitā 1/13
5. Manusamhitā 8/369
6. kāmasūtram 9/32

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